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ABSTRACT

Labeling Peter Elbow an "expressivist" is an ironic reduction of his multifaceted thought to a one-dimensional term at a time when postmodernism stresses heteroglossia. This paper outlines the recent history of "expressivism" to demonstrate its curious social construction. The paper then calls for an "end of expressivism," and this end refers not to the elimination of Elbow's writing process theories but to the rejection of this "divisive and misleading term." To replace this reductive label, the paper offers the alternative classification of Elbow as a pragmatist. Yet, this reorientation of Elbow from an "expressivist" to a pragmatist is offered in the paper with the awareness that the one true categorization is not being presented, only, hopefully, a more useful categorization--one that provides contemporary composition more room in which to grow. Includes 7 notes; contains 26 references. (NKA)

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An End to the Curious Social Construction of "Expressivism" and the Pragmatist Tradition of Peter Elbow

by Donald C. Jones

ED 420 875

Two rooms at last year's CCCC represent, for me, the curious social construction of what has come to be known as "expressivism" and the paradoxical position of Peter Elbow in contemporary composition studies.

The first room, a Grand Ball Room, was every speaker's dream and every fire marshal's nightmare. Listeners arrived early to occupy row upon row of this cavernous room, and latecomers soon sat in the aisles and stood in the back. The diverse crowd reflected the speaker's own eclectic authority. Writing teachers came to hear an innovative practitioner whose common sense metaphors like "growing" and "cooking" make a complex process comprehensible to students (*WWT* 8, 22). 1 Doctoral candidates wanted to see one of the discipline's first figures, one whose 1985 Braddock Award-winning essay "The Shifting relatonships Between Speech and Writing" taught them to theorize freewriting when, too often, it is dismissed. Other leading composition figures came to hear a provocative colleague whose thought still enriches current scholarship. From his first book, Peter Elbow continually has combined original insights with erudite scholarship. In *Writing Without Teachers* from 1973, he not only describes writing as "growing" and "cooking," but he also connects these common sense metaphors to the sophisticated theories of William Perry and Thomas Kuhn (42, 165). For me, the cavernous Grand Ball Room is emblematic of Elbow's breadth and depth, yet this expansive scholarship does not fit into a much smaller, metaphorical space that too often constrains Elbow's efforts: the pigeonhole known as 'expressivism.'

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I felt the tight fit of 'expressivism' when I attended another presentation at the 1996 CCCC. In this, the second room mentioned in my opening, another speaker

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warned against a return to "expressivism." He cited Elbow's large audience as an ominous indication of its appeal and urged vigilance against this misguided theory. He condemned this naive pedagogy because it assumed, he claimed, an "authentic self" and ignored "discursive influences."

It's the contrast between these two rooms, the first filled with listeners appreciative of Elbow's scholarship and the second in which he is dismissed as a naive "expressivist," that has motivated me to present this paper. For Elbow not only explains Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigms in *Writing Without Teachers*, but he also describes "speech communities" in order to theorize the dialectical relationship between writers and readers (156). Any assertion that Elbow considers a writer to be an autonomous, authentic self is based from an incomplete reading of his scholarship; the writer as an essential, organic being cannot be deduced from a thorough reading of his works. Labeling Elbow an "expressivist" is an ironic reduction of his multifaceted thought to a one-dimensional term at a time when postmodernism stresses heteroglossia.

In an effort to reconcile the cavernous Grand Ball Room and the smaller conference room where Elbow was pigeon-holed as an "expressivist," I began to trace the history of this taxonomic term. As I did so, I soon felt like Alice in Wonderland because the use of this term to classify composition theorists only became "curious and curiouser." To reconstruct these contrasting rooms, this paper will outline the recent history of "expressivism" in order to demonstrate its curious social construction. Then I will call for an "end of expressivism," and this "end" refers not to the elimination of Elbow's writing process theories but to the rejection of this divisive and misleading term. To replace this reductive label, I will offer the alternative classification of Elbow as a pragmatist. Yet I will offer this reorientation of Elbow from an "expressivist" to a pragmatist well aware that I am not presenting the one true categorization, only -- I hope -- a more useful one. One that provides contemporary composition more 'room'

in which to grow. I believe this pragmatist perspective is more useful because it reasserts the primacy of experience, explains the development of knowledge from experience, and locates this development within a individual/social dialectic so the importance of discursive influences upon this epistemological process is not ignored.

The concepts "expressive" and "expressivism" have a lengthy history in art and literature, and they generally refer to a personal vision of the human condition. Within composition studies, the concept of a writer trying to 'express' or 'press-out' from within a personal vision dates back to Montaigne and Rousseau, German and British Romanticism, and American Transcendentalism. Thomas Newkirk has examined these Romantic roots in an NCTE monogragraph on the personal essay (*Critical Thinking and Writing: Reclaiming the Essay* - 1989) and in *more than stories* (1989). Stephen Fishmann and Lucille McCarthy have examined "expressivism" by connecting it to a more social, German form of nineteenth century Romanticism, and most recently, Sherrie Gradin has explored the social aspects of Wordsworth's and Colderidge's Romanticism in order to refute the "expressivist" label. Gradin asks the cogent question of "whose categories are these anyway?" because "expressivists" like Peter Elbow and Donald Murray have never applied this label to their theories (1). In fact, when the current concentration on the writing process was developing, one of its earliest advocates John Dixon, in *Growth Through English* from 1967, explicitly warned that one danger of the greater concern for "process" was "blundering from dull skills into the simple formula of 'self-expression'"(12). 2 Like Gradin, I want to ask and answer "whose categories are these?"

Within composition studies, the term "expressive" was first used explicitly by James Kinneavy when he surveyed previous rhetorical taxononies and found a "surprising measure of agreement" (298). In a 1969 article entitled "The Basic Aims of Discourse" (later expanded into *The Aims of Discourse* - 1971), Kinneavy creates a

consensus among rhetoricians from Aristotle to I. A. Richards by classifying discourse as "expressive," "referential," "persuasive," and "literary" according to the emphasis placed on the writer, the subject matter, the audience, and language respectively. With the qualification that these taxonomic distinctions are not "iron-clad categories," he defines the "expressive" as discourse dominated by the writer(s) in order to discharge personal emotions, achieve individuality, or assert group aspirations (297). The neglect of any category of discourse, he argues, is as harmful as its overemphasis. For example, "the neglect of expressionism, as a reaction to progressive education," he laments, "has stifled self-expression in the student" (304).

James Britton, in *Language and Learning* from 1970, continued this use of "expressive" as a term to classify discourse. Unlike Kinneavy's call for equal emphasis on each discourse, Britton creates a developmental sequence that begins with the "expressive" which he defines as a discourse in which the writer assumes that his or her own knowledge of the subject is shared by the readers (166). Then this sequence progresses to the "transactional" which accomodates a reader's different perspective in order to be persuasive and the "poetic" which intensifies the shared viewpoint in order to accentuate the writing's form. 3

For both Kinneavy and Britton, the term "expressive" has positive connotations. For Kinneavy, it is one of four aims of discourse that should not be overvalued or ignored. For Britton, the "expressive" is the initial and central category of writing. "Progress towards the transactional," he asserts, "should be gradual enough to ensure that 'the self' is not lost on the way. It is the self that provides the unseen point from which all is viewed" (179). Although Britton privileges "expressive" writing he does not based on any assumptioon of an authentic self being pressed out. Remember Britton's title is *Language and Learning* ! He instead is acknowledging a knower's influence upon the known, and this acknowledgement heralds the curent postmodern emphasis on discursive influences. Yet when composition theories - and theorists - began to be

classified instead of discourse, "expressive" gradually acquired a negative connotation.

Richard Fulkerson is the first taxonomist of composition theories who explicitly creates an "expressive" category. In "Four Philosophies of Composition" from 1979, Fulkerson applies M. H. Abrams' literary classifications to composition theories and theorists. 4 He identifies John Dixon, Ken Macrorie, and Donald Stewart as "expressivists" who value "personal subjects," an "honest . . . voice," and "self-discovery" (344-45). He does not scorn "expressive" pedagogies in particular, rather he objects to writing teachers who pursue contradictory means and ends, such as an instructor who presents writing with "expressive" means yet evaluates a student's personal essay based on "formalist" ends (345-46). This willingness to acknowledge possibly divergent means and ends of writing instruction leads to some curious classifications. The "rhetorical" theorist Ross Winterowd, for example, seeks the "expressive" end of personal growth (345). Even more noteworthy is Fulkerson's difficulty classifying Peter Elbow. Despite Elbow's apparently "expressive" advocacy of freewriting, Fulkerson cannot easily label him because his "classroom procedures," "pedagogical goals," and "evaluative theories" are "rhetorical" - their end is effective communication with the audience (346). Both Fulkerson and the next taxonomist finally classify Elbow as a rhetorical theorist, and the social construction of "expressivism" starts to become "curious and curiouser."

In a 1981 *College English* review-essay, William Woods labels Dixon, Macrorie, and Stewart as "expressionists" (397). 5 Yet he too hesitates when he comes to Elbow. Although Elbow advocates the apparently "expressionist" means of freewriting, Woods adds "his book deals with invention and audience" so *Writing Without Teachers* is again classified as a "rhetorical" textbook (406). Woods does not label Elbow an "expressivist" which would mean that "all aspects of the communication triangle are treated as extensions of the writer's experience" (397). Let me repeat - Woods does not conclude that, for Elbow, the audience is considered "the writer's inner ear," language -

"the writer's voice," and logic - "the writer's vision" (397). Yet Lester Faigley and James Berlin make that exact claim; for Elbow the "expressivist," they contend, the writer's personal vision overwhelms all other aspects of communication - audience, language, and logic.

In "The Competing Theories Of Process" from 1986, Faigley, like Fulkerson and Woods, explicitly draws upon M. H. Abrams' concept of "expressive" literature, yet he reaches a conclusion that completely contradicts his predecessors. Unlike Fulkerson and Woods, Faigley concludes that *Writing Without Teachers* and its author are "expressive" rather than "rhetorical" because they pursue the writer-centered goals of "integrity, spontaneity, and originality" (529-30). Faigley finds the goal of spontaneity, for example, to be untenable because it suggests a pre-determined organic development. Revision, therefore, seems unnecessary and even undesirable as the flower-like text follows its own unfolding (530). Faigley admits that Elbow later addresses revision in *Writing With Power* (531), but he fails to consider *Writing Without Teachers* to be a "prelude" to the second text as Chris Burnham does (166). I suspect that Faigley fails to consider these two books on invention by a writer and revision for a reader as two parts of a larger, whole theory of composing because by 1986, the "expressive" categorization of discourse then of theorists was over a decade old. These taxonomic terms had become what Kenneth Burke called "terministic screens" that conceal as much as they reveal. The acceptance of these taxonomic terms may have led to what John Dewey has identified as the "philosophic fallacy" in which a tentative belief is mistaken for an absolute truth and used to determine other, subsequent beliefs (*EN* 27). Then, as Thomas O'Donnell warns, critics of "expressivism" end up "attacking straw[man] rhetorics of their own making" (426). Based on his absolute belief in the Romantic characteristics of "expressivism," Faigley, for example, ignores the rhetorical relationship between a writer and a reader that Elbow explicitly theorizes in *Writing With Power*. Elbow explains, "[A writer] can't give readers a finished product . . .

anymore than a playwright can actualy send a live play through the mail. She can [only] send a script" which the readers must enact (315). Unlike the next taxonomist, Faigley's condemnation is not complete. He defends "expressivist theorists" for "validat[ing] personal experience in school systems that often deny it," and he finally seeks a synthesis of "expressive," "cognitive," and "social" conceptions of writing instruction (537, 539). It is just this synthesis that James Berlin denies, rendering "expressivism" a totally pejorative term.

To begin the first of four first taxonomic texts, Berlin claims to disagree with his predecessors who believe that the various pedagogical approaches -- in his words -- "only place differing emphasis on the [various] elements of the composing process . . . writer, reality, reader, and language" (769). In "Contemporary Composition: The Four Major Pedagogical Theories" from 1982, he asserts that that these theories differ not only in their emphases, but also "at a deeper structural level" in the conception of the writer, reality, reader, and language (765-66). Although this supposed disagreement serves to distinguish Berlin from the previous taxonmists, it erroneously overlooks Woods' assertion that the "expressivist" emphasis on the writer alters, for example, the conception of language as the "writer's voice" (397). Berlin nevertheless argues that his four major categories each represent a mutually exclusive "vision of reality" (767).

Despite his later stipulation that truth for "expressivists" can "in no way be seen as comparable to Plato's transcendent world of ideas," Berlin begins by analyzing Platonic epistemology then deduces "expressivism" which produces some "curious" results (772). According to his epistemological analysis, an "expressivist" writer seeks truth through a Neo-Platonic "private vision that is divorced from impersonal [sensory] data" (772). This subjective conception of "truth exist[ing] prior to language" means that a writer struggles "to find the appropriate words" with which to 'express' an inner apprehension of knowledge (774, 777). Yet for Berlin to deduce this "expressivist" epistemology, he must ignore contradictory evidence even more than Faigley. Berlin,

for example, contends that Elbow advocates peer response "not in an attempt [by the writer]to adjust the message to the audience, since doing so would clearly be a vilation of the self. Instead the writer is trying to get rid of what is false to the self" (773). Unfortunately, there are two problems Berlin's reasoning. First, he is reasoning for his Platonic deduction as though it were absolutely true, hence committing Dewey's philosophic fallacy, and second, his conclusion is explicitly contradicted by Elbow who in *Writing With Power* advises student writers to "pay lots of attention . . . to your audience and its needs" (177).

Later in *Rhetoric and Reality* from 1987, Berlin concedes that, for Elbow "language does not simply record the private vision, but becomes involved in shaping it" (146). Yet he still reasons from his prior categories as though they were an absolute truth in order to insist that, since the "expressive" writer seeks a "private, intuitive version of reality," this "inner vision finally exists apart from language" (152, 153). Yet as Sherrie Gradin objects, Berlin depends upon the binary opposition he has created in order to privilege his prefered position (15). To do so, he must ignore the supplemental similarities between "expressivist" and "social-epistemic" theories. Daniel Royer, for example, has noted that these two theories share an emphasis on the "development of meaning" through "student-centered activity" over conformity to "static forms" prescribed by "teacher directives" (qtd. by Gradin 123). By denying such similarities, Berlin reduces Elbow's actual theory to an "expressivist" other. The categories of composition theories and theorists which Kinneavy once admitted do "overlap" have become mutually exclusive for Berlin (297). Through this curious social construction of "expressivism," the categories of composition theories and theorists have become mutually exclusive; Faigley's hope for a synthesis has been foreclosed.

I, therefore, want to call for the end of "expressivism." I want to eliminate the use of "expressivism" as a taxonomic term because it is an inaccurate reduction if Elbow's multifacted theories. James Moffet once cautioned that the closest thing to

taxonomy is taxidermy. Like a flattened butterfly specimen kept under glass, Elbow has been pinned down by this label; the movement and many angles of his writing process scholarship have been ignored. Or as Elbow himself has protested, this label seems to "hostilely motivated" term, designed to "beat me over the head with" ("Uses" 76, "Some" 84). I, therefore, want to call for the end of "expressivism." I want to eliminate the use of "expressivism" as a taxonomic term beause it is an inaccurate reduction of Elbow's multifaceted theory. I want to reorient our understanding of Elbow from an "expressivist" to a pragmatist. Yet I offer this alternative classification well aware that I also risk committing the philosophic fallacy. I cannot merely match his characteristics to a prior, absolute template; I must also look for discrepancies between my tentative beliefs about Elbow and Dewey then test this categorization by its consequences. I, however, believe the results of this reorientation are quite useful.

Both Dewey and Elbow strive to overcome the binary opposition created by either/or by advocating the consideration of both/and (see Dewey *EE* 17 and Elbow "Uses" 70). 6 Dewey, for example, disrupts the binary opposition of knowledge and language by asserting the primacy of experience. According to pragmatic philosophy, experience is "the starting point of philosophic thought" (*EN* 11). Yet this primacy is not absolute; it instead creates a series of dynamic relationships between experience, knowledge, and language. From the "felt difficulty" of an experience, an individual can develop knowledge based on Dewey's constructive process of knowing (*How* 107). From the creative tension of a uncertain experience, an individual can construct knowledge by defining the problem and seeking its experimental resolution. Of course, this process is much more complex than that quick definition and it never occurs in isolation, a present construction always depends upon previous developments of knowledge.

Elbow too asserts the primacy of experience through his emphasizing not only language that explains but also discourse that renders, that "conveys to others a sense of [the writer's] experience" ("Reflections" 136). He values this experiential writing

because he believes "discou rse that renders often yields important . . . insights such as helping us see an exception or a contradiction" ("Reflections" 137). Rendering these felt difficulties can stimulate the development of more knowledge from experience. Like Dewey, Elbow considers knowledge to be a "process of interpretation" from experience (*Embracing* 298). He identifies two fundamental forces of the constructive process of knowing: believing and doubting. According to Elbow, believing does not seek immediately "to construct or defend an argument but rather to transmit [or enlarge] an experience" ("Shifting" 288). Believing supports creating, and doubting fosters criticizing by "drain[ing] the experience from an idea and see[ing] . . . its pure propositionality" (*Embracing* 263). The alternating forces of believing and doubting, of creating and criticizing can propel a writer from the problem definition to experimental resolution of Dewey's constructive process of knowing.

By asserting the primacy of experience, Dewey and Elbow preclude the current controversy over the relationship between the individual knower and social discourses. They acknowledge language's influence upon experience and knowledge without denying the effect of an individual's experience and knowledge upon discursive practices. Dewey does not believe that thought is "complete prior to language" so words are only a neutral medium for self-expression (*EN* 141). "What seems to be fresh [thought]" Dewey instead explains, "is filled with [previous] interpretations [and] classifications" that saturate our language (*EN* 34). Thus, "the *ways* in which we believe and expect have a tremendous effect upon *what* we believe and expect" (*EN* 15, italics original). Dewey, however, heralds the postmodern emphasis upon language without denying individual agency. For he admits "experience is dependent upon an extension of language," yet he immediately stipulates in his next phrase, "[language] which is a social *product* and *operation*" (*EN* 143, italics added). By considering discourse as a social product *and* a social operation -- or process, Dewey can theorize an individual's ability -- or agency -- with which to alter language's influences based

their results in experience. He likens this process to

> intellectual disrobing. We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear . . . [from] the culture of our own time and place. But . . . we [can] take them off . . . [and] inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us. (*EN* 35)

All of our beliefs cannot be cast off simultaneously, but separate beliefs may be foregrounded for examination. For example, in this very paper, I am trying to foreground the consequences of classifying Elbow as an "expressivist" or as a pragmatist and then argue that, by conceiving Elbow as a pragmatist, the most effectice practices of his writing process theory enable us to teach our students to be agents of ideas without ever letting them imagine they are the sole authors of these thoughts.

In *WWT*, Elbow acknowledges language's influence when he locates writers and readers in "speech communities" (155). Like his pragmatist predecessor, he too avoids any binary opposition between the individual knower and social discourses by presenting the complex image of "many overlapping speech communities for each individual" (155). 7 Elbow identifies an individual who is "thinking, writing, and even talking, while alone" physically is a participant in the "commun[al] process" of language (*Embracing* 293). Although he is well aware that others have concluded that an author is "written by language," he does reach the conclusion that has plagued early postmodern thought ("Toward" 209). According to Elbow, there is a "constant tug of war" between individuals who create new meanings and social communities that "curb this looseness" (*WWT*, 154). The process of individuals using language leads to subtle variation and stark invention, and the products maintained by a specific community limit this alteration and addition. The result of this theoretical push and pull is that individuals can try on and take off certain discursive habits and judge the consequences of this Deweyan disrobing within particular discourse communities.

Several of Elbow's most effective, yet often misunderstood, practices can be used

to enact Dewey's theory of agency. Contrary to his critics, Elbow does not conceive of freewriting as a Romantic act of self-expression. Freewriting, according to Elbow, "exploits the autonomous generative powers of language and syntax themselves" (*Embracing* 59). As "words call up words, ideas call up more ideas" during freewriting, this unplanned invention of freewriting may enable a writer to disrupt as much as follow the dominant discourses because freewriting "unleashes the mind's capacity for chaos and disorganization" (*Embracing* 59). Even when freewriting conforms to conventional discourses, it exposes these ways of believing to critical examination. Freewriting places discursive practices upon the page where they can be examined, Elbow explains, as "a string of assertions arranged in space" ("Shifting" 284). Freewriting, thus, can function as both "an invitation to become less self-conscious about writing" and "to increase our awareness of what we have written" ("Toward" 210). As taught by Elbow, peer response also can expose discursive influences to deliberate examination. When students write the common essay on abortion, for example, peer responses that refer to 'the potential life of the fetus conceived' vs. 'the life of the unborn child' force the students writer to consider language's "tremendous effect" upon our thinking. Again Elbow's advocacy of the believing and doubting games not only propels a Deweyan construction of knowledge, it also provokes a critical examination of different discursive influences. As early as 1965, Elbow was theorizing and practicing a pedagogy that required students to examine a "single concrete particular" from "the widest range of conflicting models, metaphors, hypotheses, conceptual schemes and disciplines" (*Embracing* 241, 9).

It's this this richness of theory and practice that is lost when we classify Peter Elbow as an "expressivist." Susan Jarrat suggests that "the innovations of teachers like Elbow" need to be relocated "in a different theoretical context," but I believe we need to look no further than Deweyan pragmatism. And we do not have to look very far to reclassify Elbow from an "expressivist" to a pragmatist. Janet Emig, Thomas Newkirk,

Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Stephen Fishman, and others all have argued that writing process theorists like Elbow follow the "tacit tradition" of Deweyan pragmatism. Even Elbow himself has made explicit references to "William James and John Dewey" to explain his "epistemology of experience" ("Uses" 67). When we end the curious use of "expressivism" to classify Peter Elbow, his practices and theories can help us overcome such current problems as the postmodern questions of agency. By classifying Elbow as a pragmatist, we can create a greater room for composition's future.

NOTES

1. Because of the similarity of Elbow's early works, I will cite to *Writing Without Teachers* as *WWT* and *Writing With Power* as *WWP.*
2. As a pedagogical theory, "expressivism" has developed since the nineteenth century when writing in English became an academic subject for formal instruction. Kenneth Kantor has followed these developments through four historical periods since 1890. In "Creative Expression in the English Curriculum: An Historical Perspective" (1975), Kantor demonstrates that, in response to various social influences, advocates of "creative expression" have debated whether or not it has intrinsic value and whether it can be learned by all students (6). For example, during the first period of rapid industrial growth and heavy immigration from 1890 to the latter 1920's, creative expression was advocated for all students, especially during their elementary years, as a way to prepare workers and citizens. Yet none of these early advocates, the subsequent progressive teachers, and later instructors of creative expression used the exact term "expressive" that has divided contemporary composition.
3. As acknowledge *The Development of Writing Abilities* (1975) this developmental sequence begining with the "expressive" draws heavily on James Moffett's work. In *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968), Moffett traces the the progress of student writing based on the rhetorical distance from the writer's "I" to the audience "you" and on abstractive distance from the Writer's "I" to the subject "it." Britton's concept of "expressive" writing is drawn from Moffett's assertion that writers develop from egocentric narration of immediate experiences to impersonal analysis of more removed ideas; Moffett, however, never uses the term "expressive."
4. From *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), Fulkerson maintains Abrams' "expressive" and "mimetic" categories that emphasize the writer and reality respectively. He

renamed Abrams' "pragmatic" and "objective labels as the "rhetorical" emphasis on the reader and the "formalist" attention to the text.

5. Like Kinneavy and Fulkerson, Woods created a four-part taxonomy that consists of "expressionist," "language-based," "rhetoric-based," and "logic-based" textbooks. In an explanatory note he acknowledges "I have borrowed this term [expressionist] from Richard Fulkerson" and asserts "our accounts of expressionist theory are essentially in agreeement" (397).

6. Because of the similarity of Dewey's titles, I will refer to *Experience and Nature* as *EN* to distinguish it from *Experience and Education*.

7. Although the explicit topic of Elbow's discussion of speech communities is the interpretive abilities of individual readers, his theory of their agency applies to writers as well.

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